

Today I want to share a word with you that is very important to my personal spiritual life and which I think is also important to understanding this season of Advent. But before I tell you this word I need to tell you a little about the man who coined the term.

His name is Rudolf Otto, and he was a German theologian in the first decades of the 20th century. He was a unique theologian for his time because he not only studied Christianity but he was ahead of his time by studying other world religions as well, and he also studied what was then the emerging field of psychology.

By analyzing human behavior in various world religions he came to identify what he believed to be humanity's most basic primordial religious impulse, which is that as we become conscious of the world around us we invariably have some experience which makes us realize that there is a power out there, far greater than any power we possess, and that the intention of this power is unclear.

The most basic example of this awareness is when ancient people heard thunder and lightning and thought it was either the voice of a god or a battle going on in heaven. Primitive to be certain, but all of us have had some experiences in life which have made us realize that we are vulnerable in this world.

I will admit to you that, to this day, I get a little nervous during thunder and lightning storms. But more positive examples could be staring into a starry sky at night or sitting on a beach considering the vastness of the ocean. There is a power out there, responsible for it all, and at face value the intention of that power is unclear to us.

For Rudolf Otto this primordial religious instinct needed a name, and nothing that existed seemed to adequately describe the experience, so he created one. He called it the "numinous," borrowing the Latin word, *numen*, which in its most basic sense means "power," but which in Otto's use now means a sense of God's tremendous power which instills in us a sense of awe stemming from our own powerlessness.

The starry sky, the vast sea, the violent storm can all inspire this sense of the numinous, but we modern people also know that science has been able to explain these things in ways that removes from them my sense of mystery. But Otto would maintain that this sense of the numinous remains with us despite scientific explanations, because God and all the basic questions about how it all got here and where it's all going remains unknown to us. From the start God and life are great mysteries.

Then enters Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, who helps us to see and understand that this great power not only means us well but also loves us like a parent. But wait! That sounds more like Christmas and this is only the first Sunday of Advent, and that, my

brothers and sisters, is my very point. We are so accustomed to thinking of Jesus as our companion and teacher that we forget that Jesus came for the purpose of helping us to understand the numinous. We forget that without Jesus all we had was the sense of a power greater than ourselves, the intention of which was not clear to us.

And in my spiritual life, Advent is 4 weeks spent with the numinous before the birth of Jesus. The shorter, darker days as we enter winter, the haunting melodies and petitioning laments of hymns like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," the biblical prophecies read in church; these are all dripping with the numinous. Today we will also add two pieces to the liturgy with numinous intentions.

The first is Healy Willan's "Lamb of God" just before we receive communion, and the second is a moment of silence after we receive communion, to contemplate the awesomeness of God and to give thanks that in Jesus Christ this awesome God loves us like a parent.

Well, I don't know if this extended meditation on the numinous is helpful to you or not, but it will at least let you know why I'm not in a hurry to get to Christmas until I've spent some time being reminded why I need Christmas; why we all need Christmas.

Take some time during these next few weeks and see if you can find some numinous moments. Perhaps in church, perhaps elsewhere. Love the mystery that is God, then in four weeks time feel the love sent to us by God in his son Jesus. Amen.